

KFH GROUP, INC.

SOUTH TEXAS PLANNING REGION PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

Developed for the:

**SOUTH TEXAS DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

By:

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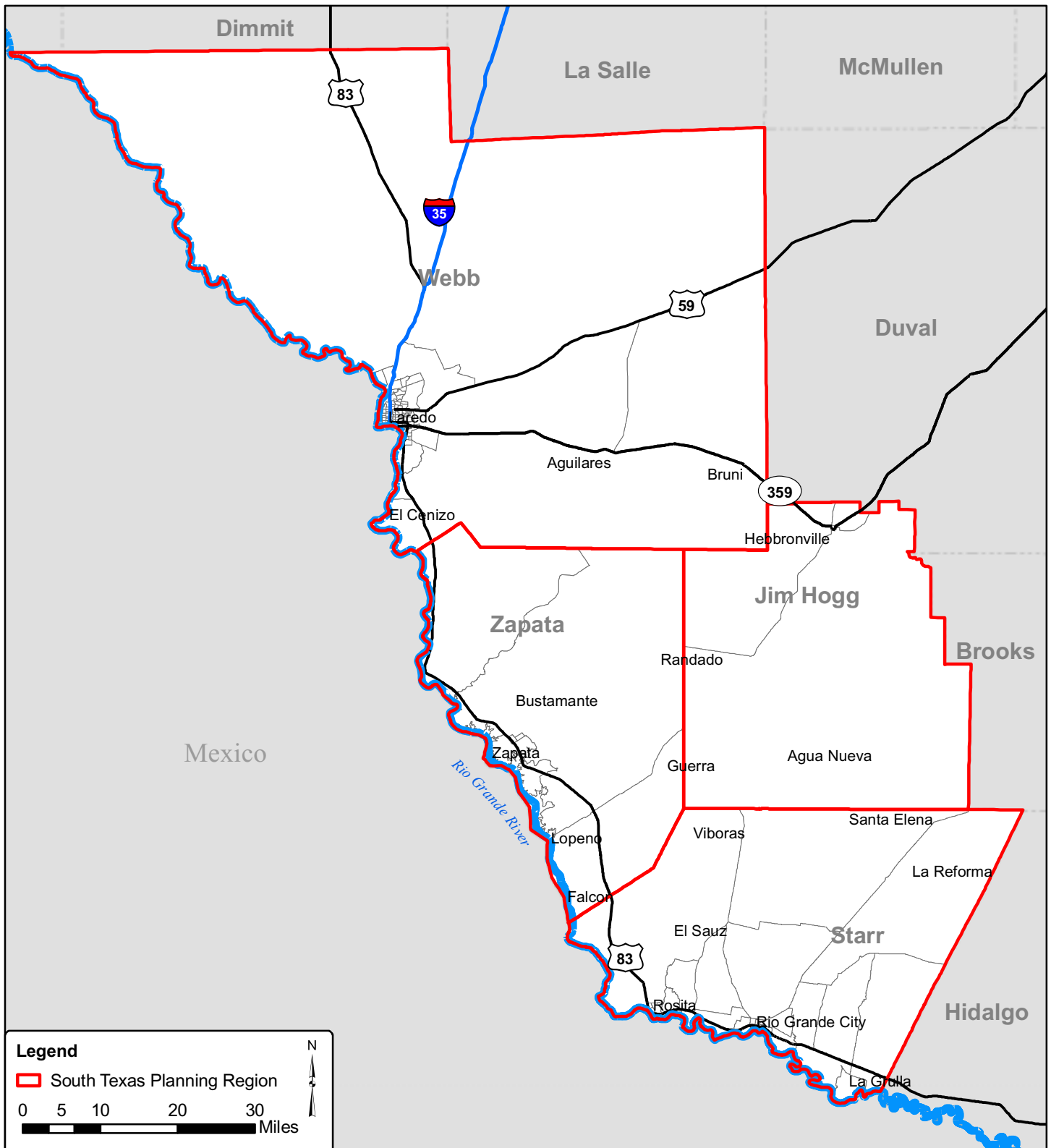
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SOUTH TEXAS PLANNING REGION PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

BACKGROUND

The four-county South Texas Planning Region (STPR) (Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, and Zapata Counties) is adjacent to Mexico with the Rio Grande River as the shared boundary on the southern side of the region. The STPR is situated in south central Texas with the City of Laredo serving as one of the principal border crossing sites between Texas and Mexico (Figure 1). The biggest city in the STPR, Laredo, and the next biggest, Rio Grande City, are at the opposite ends of the region connected by the US 83 Highway (US 83) and Interstate 35 (I-35) providing access north. Most of the service area is very rural in nature, with few major destinations in the region outside of the larger cities.

The transportation network in the STPR is managed and operated through three transit providers, a variety of organizations that provide or fund transportation in support of their primary programs (including public entities, private for profit, and non-profit firms) and a separate provider for the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Medicaid Transportation Program (MTP). The rural areas are serviced by two designated rural transportation providers - Community Action Council (CACST)-Rainbow Lines and Webb County-El Aguila. In the Laredo metro area, El Metro provides fixed-route transit and paratransit service. El Aguila and El Metro have a record of coordinating services that connect people from the rural areas of Webb County to the transit service in the Laredo metro area. This plan seeks to continue these coordination efforts and to expand the availability of transportation for all residents and visitors to the four-county service area.



**Figure 1: SOUTH TEXAS PLANNING REGION
STUDY AREA**



A Legislative Mandate

In 2003, enactment of House Bill 3588 in the 78th Texas Legislature substantially altered the way human service transportation is administered. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) was given the added responsibility for direct funding, management, and oversight of selected client transportation services delivered under the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) programs. The intent of HB 3588 is: “1. To eliminate waste in the provision of public transportation; 2. To generate efficiencies that will permit increased levels of service; and 3. To further the state’s efforts to reduce air pollution” (*HB3588, Article 13, Chapter 461, Section 461.001*).

In 2005, the TxDOT Draft Strategic Plan called for the development of regional public transportation coordination plans. Texas Transportation Commissioner Andrade then led the efforts to implement a strategy to develop a regional public transportation plan for each region of the state. This study, encompassing the STPR, is in response to that planning strategy.

Broadly, the project examined ways to more effectively “manage mobility” for the region. A major area of emphasis for this study was the coordination of services at the local level. The project included an evaluation of coordinated transit and human service transportation on a regional scale throughout the STPR. Through this planning process there was consideration of the use of New Freedom, Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC), and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5310 funding and it is included in this document.

PLAN PROCESS

The plan was completed through the execution of seven major tasks over a five-month period. Each major task became a component of a technical memorandum, each of which is contained in the appendix to this plan (Technical Memoranda Nos. 1-6). The technical memoranda are:

- Technical Memorandum No. 1: Goals and Objectives and Outreach Efforts
- Technical Memorandum No. 2: Transit Provider Inventory and Review of Resources

- Technical Memorandum No. 3: Determine Current and Future Transportation Demand and Travel Patterns
- Technical Memorandum No. 4: Evaluation Criteria
- Technical Memorandum No. 5: Organizational/Coordination and Service Alternatives
- Technical Memorandum No. 6: Transit Traveler Information System

A summary of the key findings documented in each technical memorandum and their implications for subsequent phases of the analysis is presented below.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The first major task of the project was the development of goals and objectives for the plan and the planning process in the STPR (Technical Memorandum No. 1). In conjunction with South Texas Development Council (STDC) staff and the members of the Transportation Steering Committee (TSC), the following vision was developed.

Residents (including the general public and human service clientele) and visitors to the four-county South Texas Planning Region will be able to move throughout the region safely, reliably, efficiently, and affordably by using a seamless network of public and private facilities and services that are easy to comprehend, responsive to individual travel needs, and easy to access.

This vision guided the development of the STPR's goals and corresponding objectives, addressed below. Specifically, identifying outcomes expected/anticipated.

- Enhance the quality of the customer's travel experience.
- Expand the availability of services to those who are unserved.
- Increase the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery.
- Investigate new sources of local revenue for public transit through partnerships, sponsorships, and contracting for service.

- Establish and sustain communications and decision-making mechanisms among sponsors and stakeholders to guide effective implementation of the Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan.
- Improve the image of transit across the region.

Outreach Plan

Community outreach is a vital element in: discerning needs, potential opportunities, and challenges of transportation services in the STPR. In order to facilitate this consensus building process, the Outreach Plan identified key stakeholders in each of the four counties.

I. Identify Appropriate Partners/Agencies

The first step in the process was to identify the key stakeholders within each county. This effort began in August and continued through September. The list of contacts that were targeted included:

- County Judges and other elected officials
- MPOs, county planning departments
- Human service agency representatives
- Veterans groups
- All transportation operators
- Hospitals/Medical Centers
- Transit user representatives from each county
- Intercity carriers
- Others identified as appropriate

II. Receipt of Input

The second step included contacting the key stakeholders and setting up on-site community outreach sessions. In addition, where possible, we piggybacked on pre-existing meetings to avoid duplication of effort. Information for this project was acquired through one of the following appropriate methods depending upon the stakeholders involved:

- One-on-one meetings/interviews
- Public meetings
- Phone interviews
- E-mail input

REVIEW OF EXISTING SERVICES

The next major task of the project was documentation of existing resources for providing regional public transportation (Technical Memorandum No. 2). This entailed a review of transportation services by each provider. This effort was led by the STDC. The surveys received by the STDC were reviewed and summarized in Technical Memorandum No. 2.

Existing transit providers include Laredo Transit Management, Inc. (El Metro) in the City of Laredo, El Aguila, the designated rural transportation provider in Webb County, and CACST-Rainbow Lines the designated rural transportation provider in Starr, Jim Hogg, Zapata and Duval County, which is outside the STPR. Further, the Medicaid operator in the STPR selected by TxDOT-MTP to operate the service is LeFleur Transportation. The Area Agency on Aging (AAA) contracts with the three rural counties. This results in three separate services in for each, Jim Hogg, Starr, and Zapata County: the AAA, TxDOT-MTP, and the rural public system. Each system provides similar service resulting in duplication of effort.

Existing Coordination

In light of the rural composition of the STPR and the limited number of transit providers, the operators have managed to coordinate some level of services. El Metro and El Aguila currently coordinate certain services. El Aguila connects customers living in rural areas of Webb County to certain fixed-route stops, including the transit center in the City of Laredo serviced by El Metro. It should be noted that the TxDOT-MTP is far and away the largest human service transportation program, considerably larger than all other coordination opportunities combined. Unfortunately, TxDOT-MTP chose not to coordinate this very large program in a recent selection of providers

Coordination efforts are sparse in the STPR and there are other agencies that can benefit from improvements, such as:

1. Adult Day Care – This service should be coordinated with the general public service in the STPR.
2. Area Agency on Aging – Senior transportation service to meals and services should be coordinated throughout the STPR.

CURRENT AND FUTURE TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

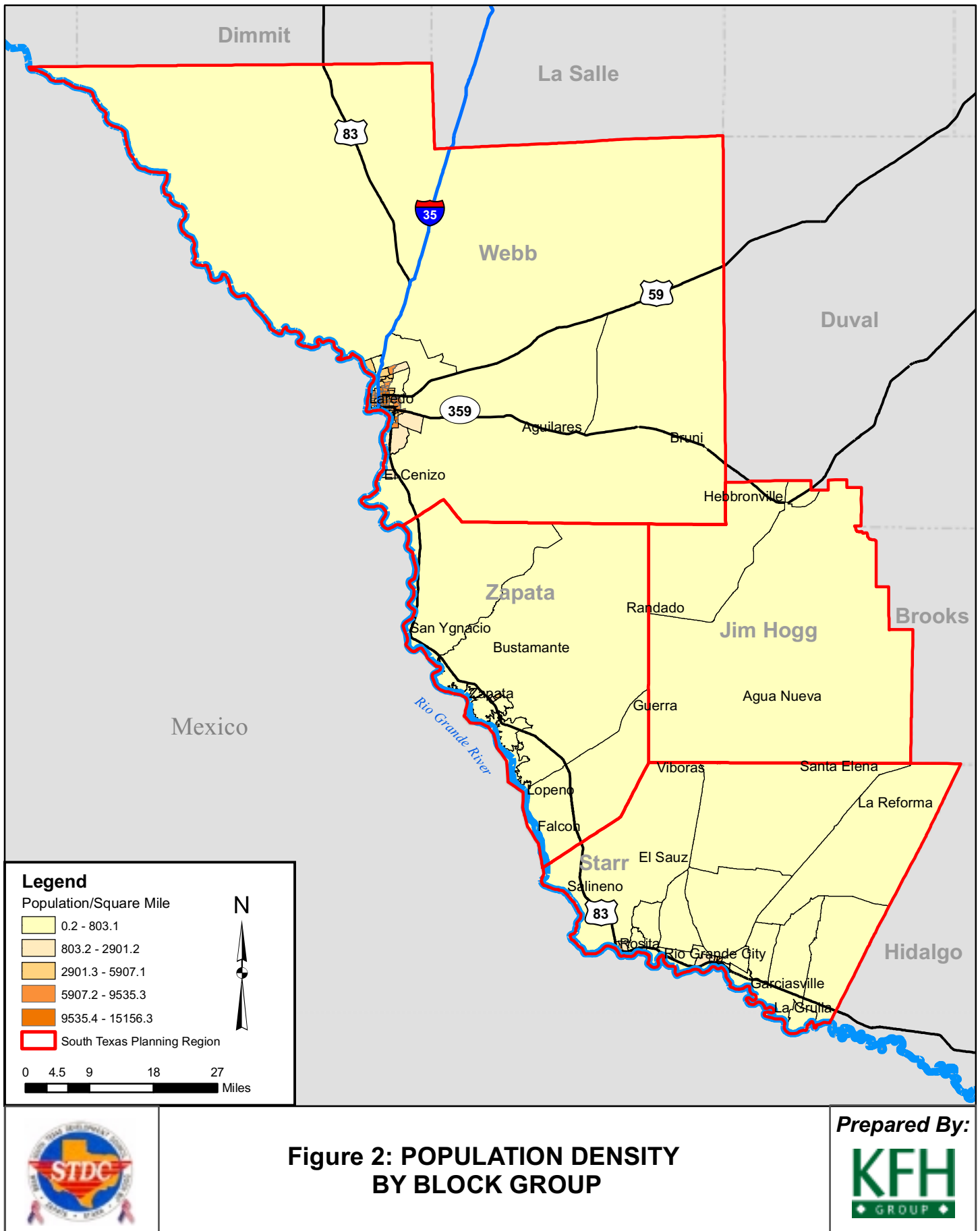
Technical Memorandum No. 3 reviewed and assessed transit needs in the service area. Primarily, the technical memorandum 1) introduced the service area; 2) reviewed demographics and land use providing an understanding of where transit riders reside and where they need to go, 3) reviewed travel patterns and identified major travel corridors, and 4) estimated future commute patterns.

Service Area

The STPR service area encompasses four linked counties with a total population of 220,904 according to the 2000 Census. The vast majority of these residents are in Laredo. Table 1 displays the population of cities of at least 2,000 people in the region. Several population counts were not available and were not included in the table.

Demographics

The analysis conducted in this study resulted in a representation of transit needs of those population segments that are potentially transit dependent (Figure 2) as well as the overall population distribution in the STPR Study Area. Potentially transit dependent population segments are those segments of the population that, because of socioeconomic characteristics (age, disability, income, or automobile availability), may potentially require transit services to meet mobility needs.



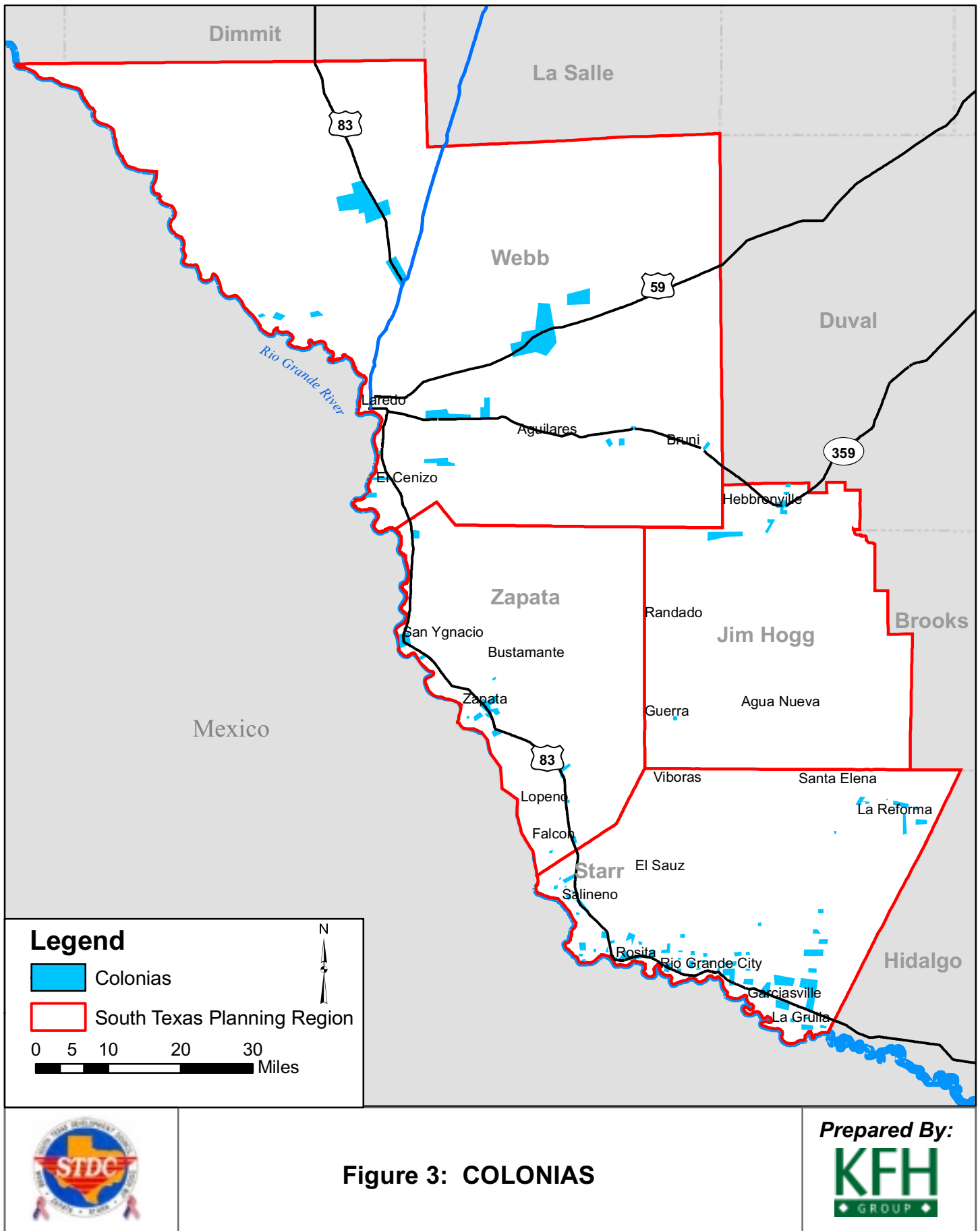
**Table 1: CITIES WITH POPULATIONS OF AT LEAST 2,000
IN THE STPR STUDY AREA**

Name	1990 Population	2000 Population	2005 Population
Laredo	122,899	176,576	207,787
Rio Bravo	Not available	5,553	5,724
Zapata	7,119	4,856	Not available
Hebbronville	4,465	4,498	Not available
Rio Grande City	9,891	11,923	13,651
Roma	8,059	9,617	10,900
Rosita North	Not available	3,400	Not available
Rosita South	Not available	2,574	Not available
Garciasville- La Casita	1,186	2,177	Not available

The demographic analysis resulted in the identification of urban, suburban, and rural areas with relative needs. The maps illustrate that outside of the Laredo metro area, most of the study area is rural, with points of relative population density along the US 83 corridor. Although, not as populous, the rural areas also exhibit transit dependent populations. In Starr County, the northern half of the County; Jim Hogg County has a an area in the northwest section; and the northwest section of Zapata County, bounded by the Rio Grande River and Webb County exhibit transit dependent characteristics.

Another important attribute of transit dependency is the vehicles per household. The Census 2000 data reveal that the STPR has a higher percentage of households without a vehicle when compared to the State and National estimates for the same criteria.

In light of these population characteristics, also relevant, are the locations of the colonias in the STPR (Figure 3). Generally, these residential communities scattered along the Texas-Mexico border may lack some of the most basic living necessities, such as potable water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing. The colonias are located along the major road corridors.



Major Destinations

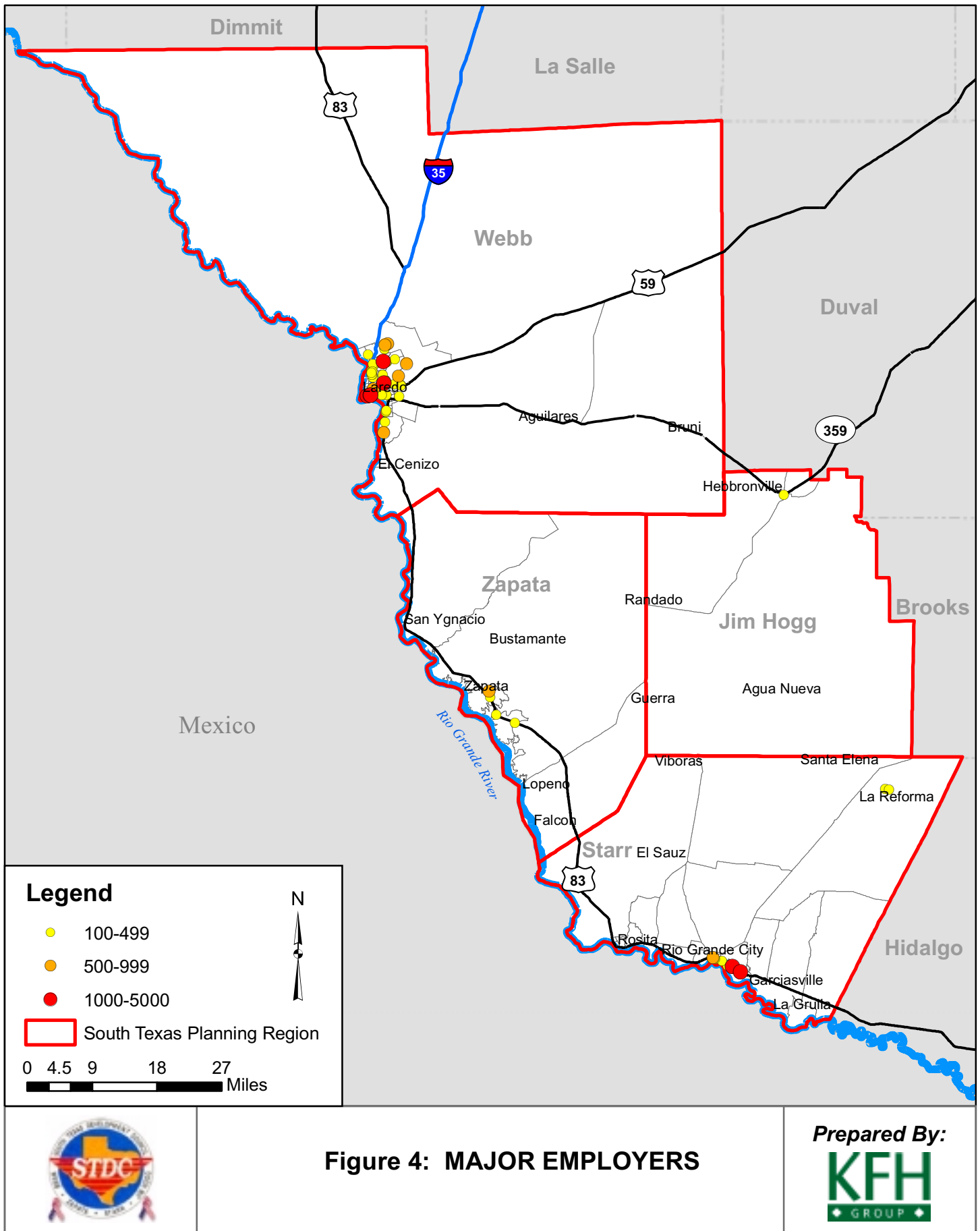
Another component of the transit planning process is identifying major trip destinations within the study area, including major employers (Figure 4), shopping centers (Figure 5), schools, and medical facilities (Figure 6). The analysis of land uses in the STPR displayed that:

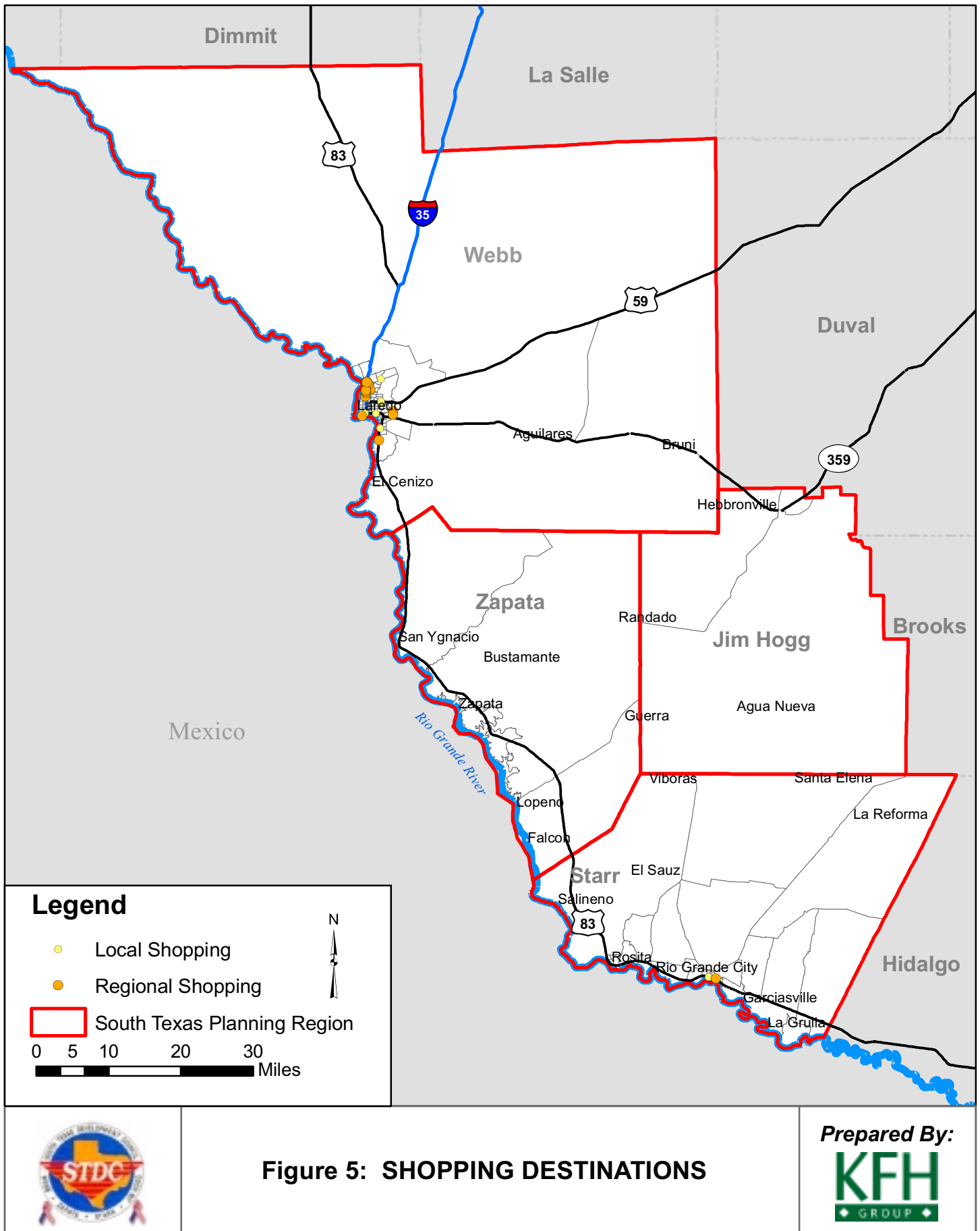
- Rio Grande City and the Laredo metro area can modestly expand fixed-route/flex route service. They are both centers of trip origins in need of transit for employment, medical, and shopping needs, generating a significant number of trips.
- Two of the counties in the STPR, Zapata and Jim Hogg Counties, have few resources. These counties have the greatest need to access destinations outside their counties.
- The smaller towns of Zapata and Hebbronville can possibly sustain a one vehicle dial-a-ride service.

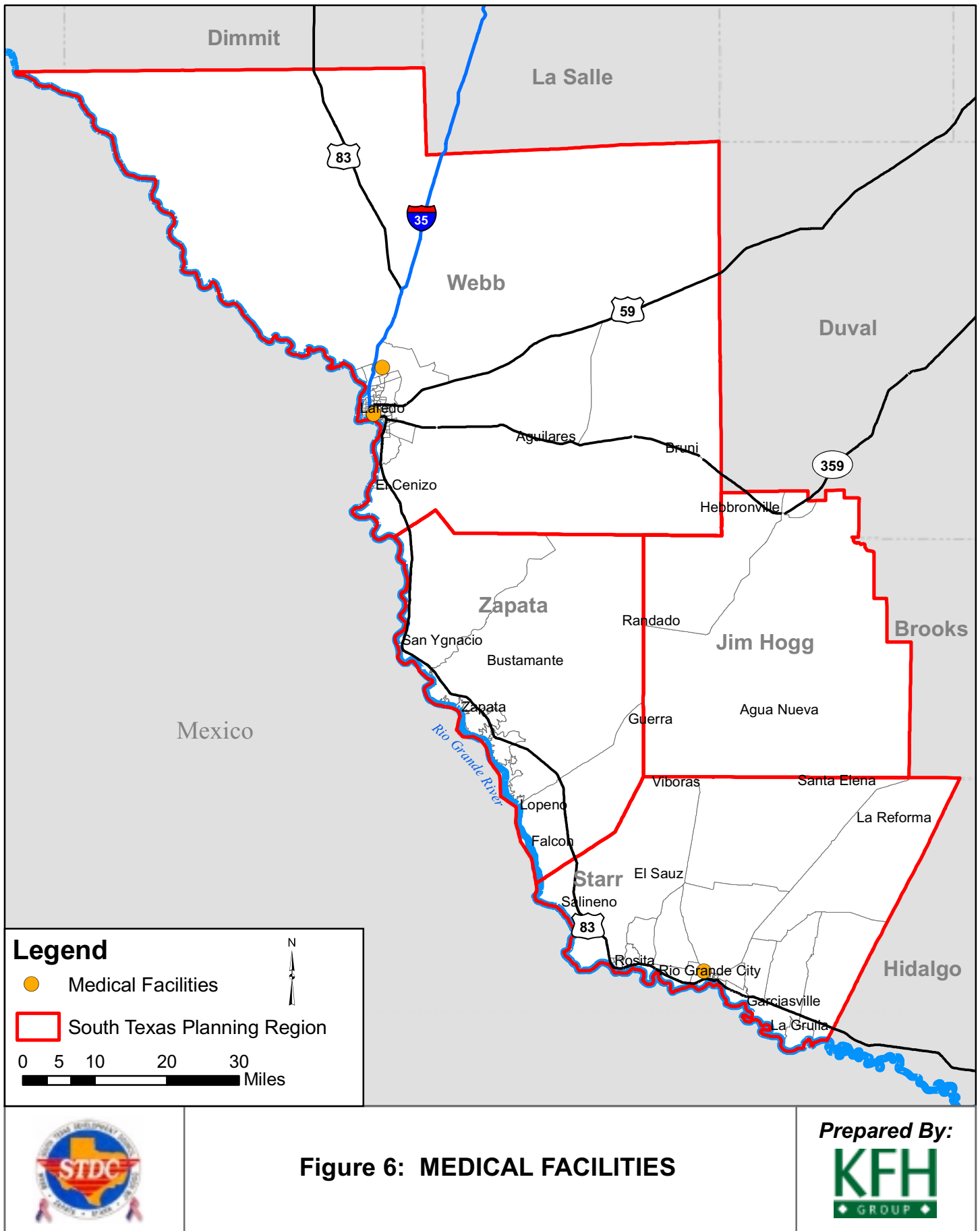
Travel Patterns

Work trip patterns were derived from Journey to Work data from the 2000 U.S. Census. Specifically, summaries were generated for the four-county STPR by place of residence, place of work, and worker flows between home and work. At the county level, Census data was supplemented by discussions with the operators, human service agencies, elected officials, and the public during outreach sessions. The analysis of commute patterns indicates the following future travel patterns:

- Based upon information from the 2000 Census Journey to work data, transit ridership in the STPR will grow at a nominal rate with the overall share of commute trips that use transit as the preferred mode, smaller than the State of Texas as a whole.
- For the foreseeable future, the top transit market in the region will be the travel sheds of Laredo and Rio Grande City. Second to develop will be travel between communities, especially between Hebbronville and Laredo, Zapata and Laredo, and generally east west along US 83.
- There may be the possibility of establishing a commuter bus service from Starr County to Hidalgo County.







These future commute patterns further illustrate the relatively small commuting interchange between the counties within the STPR. After reviewing the travel patterns and the survey responses for the STPR, the following findings and implications emerged:

- The STPR has three of the poorest counties in terms of average household income.
- Related to the point above, vehicle ownership in the STPR is below that of the State of Texas average.
- Population in the region and in Mexico will continue to grow at a rapid pace. This is particularly noticeable in many colonias in the region.
- The culmination of the above three facts revealed an unmet transit need in the STPR.
- The STPR does have significantly more commuters carpooling to work. This point illustrated favorability to ridesharing and supports the need for regional vanpool and carpool program.
- Measured by the absolute number of commuters, Webb County is by far the primary destination county for workers in the region, due to the size of its own population and employment centers.
- While much of the data describes work trip patterns, the importance of non-work related trips in the region cannot be understated, particularly for certain stakeholder groups such as veterans groups, lower income workers, and the elderly whose needs were discussed and examined during the outreach process. The outreach process repeatedly confirmed the significance of access to medical facilities, particularly between Laredo and Rio Grande City, for youth and elderly who live in much more remote areas and currently do not benefit from fixed-route scheduled service to their appointments.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Evaluation criteria were developed in Technical Memorandum No. 4 to help identify the alternatives that best met the needs of the region. The criteria were derived from the study goals and objectives identified in this study (Technical Memorandum No. 1). The criteria also include specific measures that contribute to the determination of the likely success of each proposed strategy.

Each proposed strategy will receive a score for each applicable criterion. Every goal is accompanied by a set of *Performance Objectives* that identify the major components of the goal. The performance objective is accompanied by a set of Measures of Effectiveness (MOE) that will be used to assess the value of a proposed improvement strategy. The measures, which are both quantitative and qualitative, apply only to that objective. Based on the goals and performance objective, each MOE evaluates an aspect of the proposed public transportation improvement that will contribute to the proposal's overall ability to satisfy the goals. The MOE that were applied to this study were:

Service Quality

- ***Frequency of Service*** – measure of headways and capacity of fixed routes.
- ***Hours of Operations*** – hours of operations in light of the needs of the STPR.
- ***On-Time Performance*** – two methods of calculation depending on the type of service provided: fixed- or deviated/demand-response. This measure assists in identifying the overall timeliness of service to a fixed-route stop or a specialized service stop.
- ***Location and Number of Stops*** – determine the service area and the accessibility of the fixed-route service.

Service Efficiency

- ***Operating Cost Per Passenger*** – uses the annual operating cost divided by the passenger trips for the same period.
- ***Operating Cost Per Revenue Hour*** – calculated by dividing the annual operating cost by the total scheduled hours that revenue vehicles are in revenue service for the same period. A revenue hour is generally defined as the time the vehicle is in service to carry passengers, other than charter passengers. This measure assists in understanding the overall system expenses in light of revenue hours.
- ***Operating Cost Per Revenue Mile*** – calculated by dividing the annual operating cost by the number of miles traveled by authority vehicles while in revenue service for the same period.
- ***One-Way Passenger Trip Per Hour*** – the key indicator of performance. This MOE measures productivity.

- ***Farebox Recovery*** – calculated by dividing the annual revenue provided by passengers by the operating cost of the same period. This measure assists in understanding the market of the service in the region.

Marketing/Image

- ***Brochure/Maps*** – having a supply of this documentation that can be easily disseminated to the public and potential users.
- ***Logo*** – identifying the need for a regional or local system logo that is obvious and can be detected by any member of the public, passenger, and potential passenger.

BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS

As part of the planning process review of potential barriers and constraints was conducted and is included in Technical Memorandum No. 5. The greatest barriers and constraints include funding – particularly acute for STPR, given its rural geography, mostly small communities and distant destinations. The other major barriers include institutional issues relating to coordination of public transit services.

ORGANIZATIONAL/COORDINATION AND SERVICE ALTERNATIVES

Technical Memorandum No. 5 developed a range of options/alternatives for improving public transit services in the STPR. Needs were compared with existing services to formulate pertinent alternatives. The foundation for the development of service options was based on the results from the outreach process, the review of demographic information, and the analysis of supplemental data. The options were built on existing STPR transportation arrangements and services. The Transportation Steering Committee carefully reviewed the alternatives and then gave the consultants the guidance to develop the plan.

The consultants determined that due to the success (high ridership) of the urban systems, the current fixed-route structure should remain intact, or be expanded where necessary. Accordingly, changes were focused on underserved areas rather than areas with high ridership. Most importantly, was understanding the existence of multiple providers in the rural areas of the STPR and the need to coordinate these services for greater efficiencies among the operators.

Organizational/Coordination

The principal issue related to coordination is the need to coordinate the existing three transit systems, a large Medicaid Transportation Program (MTP) private provider, and, where possible, a private transit/intercity provider. Regional connectivity is an essential ingredient in regionalization. Additionally, another crucial component for regionalization is a centralized source of information – one source of information for all regional travel.

Operational

The alternatives address unmet needs and look at new ways of providing service in the STPR. Given that Laredo and Rio Grande City are the two major metro areas in the four-county study area, most of the need is located in the rural areas. Especially, with population growth and land use development occurring outside the Laredo municipal limits, the need for rural transportation is highly emphasized. Where possible, scheduled-route service (daily) should be promoted and replace paratransit service. Additionally, commuter service should be considered.

COORDINATED TRANSPORTATION: PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR THE SOUTH TEXAS PLANNING REGION

The Transportation Steering Committee worked closely with the consultants and the public to develop a plan that will meet a variety of transportation needs for all residents of the four-county STPR. This plan addresses a wide variety of organizational, coordination and service activities. In addition the plan addresses the needs associated with the JARC and New Freedom initiatives, as well as funding for FTA Section 5310 program.

INTRODUCTION

The first part of this section of the Public Transportation Coordination Plan reviews the assumptions made through this planning process. The second part of this section reviews the organizational coordination issues that should be employed, followed by rural service activities

and then urban activities. Both sections ensure that JARC and New Freedom initiatives are being met, as well as FTA Section 5310 funding for elderly and persons with disabilities.

Service Assumptions

1. **Population Growth** – Population continues to grow rapidly along the I-35 corridor in the Laredo metro area, along the US 83 corridor, and northern parts of the region. That growth will fuel the need for increased transit services.
2. **Funding Issues** – The predominant issue in regard to funding is the need for local dollars to match federal funding in rural areas. These funds will be secured from local governments, private businesses, and human service agencies that coordinate transit services.
3. **Mobility Management** – Short-range planning and management activities and projects for improving coordination among public transit and other transportation providers. In this effort, the region will designate one entity to coordinate these mobility management activities and combine/coordinate with a variety of operators of service and funding agencies.
4. **Coordination Efforts** – There is little coordination in the rural areas, the planning effort will continue to focus on rural and additional human service coordination. Further continued coordination of services between urban and rural areas will be encouraged.
5. **Coordination Must Make Business Sense** – It is important to note that coordination must be a mutually beneficial agreement. That is, coordination must make business sense.
6. **Fixed/Flex Route and Other Scheduled Service** – Productivity is a key to success. TxDOT funding is dependent to a large degree on numbers of trips provided. The best way to provide the largest number of trips is to utilize the array of fixed route and hybrid services that tend to group trips according to a schedule. This is being done by El Metro and El Aguila.
7. **Use of Technology** – While coordination does not necessarily require technology to be successful, the use of technology can be of significant help in the process if used properly. There are areas where technology can assist in the overall mission of providing more service.

JARC, NEW FREEDOM, AND SECTION 5310

JARC funds for access to employment for low income individuals, the New Freedom funding to expand opportunities for persons with disabilities, and the FTA Section 5310 funding for elderly and persons with disabilities all require a plan to coordinate these funds. As part of this plan (which is incorporated in this planning process) the next sections identify the priorities for these funds, as determined by the Transportation Steering Committee.

ORGANIZATIONAL/COORDINATION TASKS

The transportation programs in Webb County are well coordinated between El Metro in Laredo and El Aguila in rural Webb County. CACST-Rainbow Lines and most of the human service transportation programs in the region are not coordinated. Medicaid transportation (managed by TxDOT-MTP) provided by LeFleur Transportation, under contract, duplicates transportation administration, management, and operations, especially in the rural counties. However, while the study committee believes that these services should be coordinated at the local level, this is currently totally dependent on TxDOT – PTN/MTP decisions. In addition, each rural county has CACST-Rainbow Lines and separate senior transportation operated in each county.

The majority of the coordination effort over the course of the plan will focus on activities that the region can control:

- Coordinating human service transportation in the rural counties.
- Developing a mentoring program as well as a vehicle replacement program.
- Coordinating services between El Metro, El Aguila, and CACST-Rainbow Lines.
- Development of a Mobility Manager and vanpool program.

Coordination Task No. 1 - Coordinating Paratransit Service

As identified in the alternatives phase of this planning effort, there is a need to enhance coordination in the region to maximize productivity and safety. The plan calls for a phased in

approach where the first step will be to formalize the coordination work group. This will be followed by a variety of coordination opportunities for the rural areas.

Coordination Task No. 1.1 - Formalize Coordination Work Groups

The key participants in the STPR should continue to work together in a formalized setting allowing all participants and other interested parties to participate. A committee should be formed to include: all major operators, funding agencies, private sector transit providers, other agencies, and consumers. Also, every effort should be made to include local political and/or business leaders.

Each county should have its own coordination committee to explore opportunities in each unique county. These work groups will first address the need for coordinated long distance service, and then address the potential of pooling their resources and coordinating further.

Coordination Task No. 1.2 - Coordination with Small Operators – Developing a Mentoring Program

While some agencies and organizations with small scale operations will not want to be involved in a large-scale coordination effort; there are areas where these agencies can benefit from coordination. These agencies, typically in support of other programs, include one and two van adult day care operators, senior centers, veterans groups, hospital shuttles, as well as other entities. These transportation services have stated that they have no interest in relinquishing their service to a larger system. In fact, it is important that these agencies maintain their identities because their strength comes from their passion, dedication, and volunteerism, which would disappear in a coordinated network. This plan wants to encourage that passion by nurturing the agencies and allowing them to flourish.

With that understood, there are a number of areas where these small agencies can benefit from coordination. El Metro and El Aguila will initiate a mentoring and support program encouraging small agencies to seek advice, support, training, or even vehicles. Specifically, these efforts may include small agency participation in programs developed by the transit systems such as: driver training, maintenance, insurance, and vehicle replacement programs.

These efforts can result in immediate safety and performance dividends to those small one or two vehicle services.

The vehicle replacement program will have the transit agencies transfer or lease (for a minimal amount) vehicles being retired, to a non-profit where the intentions are for the second agency to continue to provide transportation. The receiving agency would be required to train its drivers through the larger system's training program and utilize the transit system's maintenance programs. Minimal funding is required to initiate these activities through the Mobility Manager. The agency receiving the vehicle would report ridership, maintenance, and other documentation to the transit system. This program will allow more service to be provided to more people in the service area.

Coordination Task No. 2 - Coordination of Human Service Transportation

In this task, El Metro and El Aguila will work closely with the Webb County Area AAA to target elderly populations in need of paratransit services throughout their service areas. These efforts are intended to improve mobility for elderly and persons with disabilities that cannot ride the fixed-route or fixed schedule bus service. The Workforce Boards for the region will also work closely with the Mobility Manager to continue to identify needs and solutions. Funding for these services can include AAA funds, New Freedom, and Section 5310.

Coordination Task No. 3 - Development of a Regional Mobility Manager

The South Texas Development Council (STDC), working with each of the providers, funding agencies, and other interested stakeholders will identify the regional Mobility Manager that will coordinate a wide variety of public and private transportation service in addition to acting as the regional rideshare manager for the four counties.

The Mobility Manager can have a variety of planning and administrative/financial activities to perform. The activities selected for the Mobility Manager will be determined by the on-going coordination Committee. These activities may include, but are not limited to:

- Planning and identifying needs and solutions
- Seeking public and private funding
- Coordinating the various operators in the Laredo area
- Coordinating human service transportation
- Conducting rideshare efforts
- Organizing and staffing various committees in urban and rural areas
- Working closely with operators to avoid duplication and waste.

The Mobility Manager can also assist in the distribution of vehicles retired by a transit operator (but still quite serviceable) to local volunteer and human service organizations. These efforts will be funded through JARC and New Freedom funding as well as Section 5311 and Section 5310 funding.

Ridesharing

Currently in the STPR there is no mechanism to aid in the formation of vanpools or carpools. Analysis of the commute patterns revealed an opportunity for ridesharing in each of the major corridors. Ridesharing is typically composed of a central database for matching individuals with similar commute trips into carpools or vanpools. Over time, these successful vanpools can grow into fixed routes.

Carpools include informal or formal arrangements by individual to share a ride to work or on other regular trips. Vanpools are typically a formal arrangement by a group of 7 to 15 individuals that share a similar commute trip. Often a governmental authority facilitates these arrangements. In the STPR, the county workgroups can initiate this program by identifying the potential demand, with eventual transfer of the program to the Mobility Manager responsible for developing the ridesharing and commuter program (designed to attract as many persons with disabilities and low income individuals as possible). Many vanpools pay for themselves as well, while others receive some subsidy.

Some issues that need to be further studied to implement in the rideshare program in the STPR include:

- A. The issues and cost savings surrounding the use of lease operated passenger vans verses public owned passenger vans. Again however, if the vans are full, they can pay for themselves.
- B. The best subsidy and cost structure to optimize reporting and increase customer utility.
- C. The level of safety associated with 15 passenger vans and the impact of driver training courses for mitigating accident rates.
- D. A mechanism to add part time riders to the vanpools for training and other needs.
- E. Accessible vehicles should be available as needed

SERVICE AND OPERATING TASKS

In order to effect a change – an improvement in what the customer sees, ultimately there must be service improvements. The TSC stated that three of the primary goals of the plan should be to:

- Enhance the Quality of the Customer’s Travel Experience
- Expand the Availability of Services to Those Who are Unserved
- Increase the Cost-Effectiveness and Efficiency of Service Delivery

There are two basic considerations in designing effective and efficient transit services in areas not yet served. **Effectiveness is doing the right things, while efficiency is doing things right.** The system is *effective* if it meets the travel needs of the residents. This means identifying the markets for transit and determining if those markets are served. A system is *efficient* if it meets those needs in a manner that maximizes transit service delivery while minimizing resources expended. This means providing a mix of services that are appropriate to the need. The most challenging aspect of being efficient is to use less expensive fixed-route or fixed schedule services in areas which can sustain those services, and then fill in with more expensive demand-responsive services in areas without sufficient densities or for persons unable

to use fixed-route services -- to provide a mix of services that do not compete and result in the most rides and service for the dollars expended.

Rural Areas

The rural areas, with their concentrations of colonias and needs to travel long distances to places like Laredo and McAllen, should coordinate schedules and ridesharing of rural county operators – AAA, MTP, and rural public transit. By coordinating these trips, service expansion opportunities will become available to operators. The operators can also share riders on vehicles used for long distance trips. Fixed schedules should be evaluated for colonias in each county. In the future, operators should coordinate ridesharing, training, maintenance and other functions. Such as:

- Coordinate long distance schedules (to Laredo and McAllen) of rural operators to expand service for all. This is the county operated senior service, MTP and public transit.
- Share riders on coordinated long distance vehicles.
- Target fixed-route or fixed schedule service for colonias in Laredo and the rest of Webb County as well as in the other three counties.
- Commuter/Medical Service – There is a need for limited service through the US 83 corridor to Laredo and to McAllen in Hidalgo County. At this time the level of need should justify vanpool services. These services can be funded through JARC funding and would go a long way to addressing these needs.

Operational Task No. 1 - Implement Coordinated Long Distance Schedules and Shared Ride Service

This task expands opportunities for seniors and others giving more access to Laredo (or McAllen). The three rural providers in Starr, Jim Hogg, and Zapata Counties will coordinate service to Laredo and McAllen. Rather than having two or three operators going on the same

day, these providers can share in this service and schedule one vehicle each day of the week, giving customers a much higher quality service that is more dependable.

Through agreements, each system can book on the other based on the ground rules established prior to implementation of the program. A cost allocation formula can be worked out for payment to each other for trips provided. This would allow each system to retain control, while each system becomes more productive, lowering the cost per trip for all systems.

Operational Task No. 2 - Continue to Coordinate Service in Rural Areas

The objective here is to improve efficiency and effectiveness in rural areas. After coordinated schedules have been identified and implemented, the coordination working group will look at group driver training, maintenance assistance, and other support as discussed in the Coordination Tasks.

Operational Task No. 3 – Fixed-Route/Fixed Schedules to Colonias

Considering the increasing population in the rural areas of Webb County, a review of increased fixed route services to the colonias is in order. In future years, as demand and ridership increase, there may be opportunity to provide fixed schedule service to areas outside of Webb County. El Aguila will seek JARC and New Freedom funding to ensure that these communities have access to these services in Webb County. In addition, the other counties should review their needs annually as well and apply for these funding sources as the need becomes evident.

Operational Task No. 4 - Expansion of Existing Urban Service

The Laredo metro area is growing rapidly with corresponding growth occurring in the colonias and the city. Laredo will be seeking JARC and New Freedom funding to ensure that these communities and other growing areas receive service throughout the five-year horizon of the service plan.

Operational Task No. 5 - Commuter, Job Training, Education, and Medical Service

The demographic review and analysis of travel patterns, surveys of operators, public meetings and discussions with other stakeholders reveals an agreement that more commuter opportunities into Laredo and McAllen in Hidalgo County should be in place for work, training, school and medical service. Outside of Webb County, where El Aguila does provide some service, there are no corridors that can sustain a bus. It is recommended that vanpools be promoted and marketed and if ridership increases in the future, the vanpool can be turned into a fixed-route.

Major Corridors

Based on the analysis of U.S. Census Journey to Work data in Technical Memorandum No. 3 we can identify the following:

- Based upon information from Census data and analysis, transit ridership in the Laredo region will grow.
- The Laredo metro area attracts, and will continue to attract a large percentage of commute trips.
- For the foreseeable future, the top transit market in the region will be the travel sheds of Laredo and Rio Grande City.
- The second to transit market to develop will be travel between communities, especially between Hebbronville and Laredo, Zapata and Laredo, and generally east west along US 83.

The Laredo and Rio Grande City travel sheds can support vanpools and market the service to the point where a large bus would be more appropriate.

Operational Task No. 6 – Dial-a-Ride Service in Towns

The primary towns of each county with at least 2,500 population count are candidates for Dial-a-Ride service. Outside of Laredo and Rio Grande City, there are six towns in the study

area that satisfy this population threshold and they are identified in Table 1. This immediate response type of service is designed to attract more users through its convenience. Many persons with disabilities will find it very convenient to use for routine needs.

It should be noted that the Dial-a-Ride service will only be effective if it is fully coordinated with all three rural providers in each county. If there is competition from one or two other operators, this approach will not work. This task will be implemented in year five or later.

As with other services, these services will need the support of the local communities in which they serve. It is anticipated that local governments and private businesses will generate the local match in order for this service to start. New Freedom funding will support this service.

There would typically be one Dial-a-Ride vehicle serving the smaller towns. The simplest approach is to have the driver answer calls for service within the next hour and schedule the customer while they are on the telephone.

These towns can each sustain a one bus Dial-a-Ride with some of the larger towns, justifying two vehicles. Dial-a-Ride service is such that the customer calls for service and within an hour the vehicle arrives to take the customer to a variety of local destinations. It operates similar to a shared-ride taxi. In fact, taxi providers can be used to supplement the service on a subcontract basis (if they meet FTA requirements as applicable). Often these services have the customer call the driver directly for service. The driver then logs in the trip and provides it in the proper order. This approach is used in a number of communities and works best if operating in a small well defined service area. The enhanced quality of this service and the real time scheduling will allow for higher productivity (at least four one way trips per hour). Fares should be \$2 with discounts available. Funding for this service should come from each town and from New Freedom funding because the service will expand opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Operational Task No. 7 - Shopper Shuttle Services

With peak hour vehicles available for other services during midday, it may be possible to offer shopper shuttle services to sponsors willing to support the transit system. The shopper shuttle targets neighborhoods with high numbers of transit dependent populations, typically elderly and persons with disabilities and frequent destinations (e.g. Wal-Mart, HEB, and medical

centers), and can be very effective during off peak hours. Often these arrangements pay for themselves through funding from the retailers, who in return, receive the business, advertising/promotion, and they get involved in a positive way with their communities.

There are numerous examples (in Texas and across the country) of this type of service being successful with supermarkets and discount “big boxes.” Typically, shuttles target transit dependent persons (elderly, disabled, and low-income persons) in their neighborhoods. Service is usually for shopping and medical.

OTHER COORDINATION AND OPERATIONAL TASKS

There are a number of other tasks that need to be accomplished in order to ensure success. These are discussed below:

- **Transit Traveler information System - One Stop Shopping** – a single source of general and specific information for all transit services available (primarily in Webb County). This can include a single web site, telephone support and the centralized ticket purchasing. In the rural areas this can include El Aguila, and CACST-Rainbow Lines, while in urban areas it can be the paratransit operators, fixed-route, and intercity bus.
- **Through Ticketing and Transferring** – At major transfer points, passengers should be able to purchase tickets to ride between El Metro, El Aguila, and intercity service.

ACTION PLAN

The Action Plan is designed to maximize improvements. That is, provide the most service to the most people. Therefore as part of this plan, we emphasize the coordination of scheduled long distance services first, in order to maximize ridership. Please note that this is necessary because TxDOT allocates annual funds based on a formula that stresses high ridership. The lower ridership services will be implemented in the latter years of the plan.

Year 1

Year 1 will include a variety of tasks, starting with the development of workgroups, one for each county, to start the coordination process among agencies in the region. The second task will be scheduling long distance services among operators. Concurrent with these other activities, STDC, with input from all operators, should start and complete a variety of planning initiatives and develop a complete project plan in preparation for applying for funding.

These committees will identify the coordination path that the operators will take over the next five years.

Tasks

1. Establish Workgroup Committee – Building on the efforts underway and in conjunction with key stakeholders, a formal committee will be created for each county that will identify transportation needs.
2. Agreement between operators on coordination of long distance services.
3. Implement the coordinated long distance service.
4. Evaluate and plan for service expansions to colonias (El Aguila, El Metro, CACST - Rainbow Lines)
5. Seek JARC, New Freedom, and Section 5310 funding for the services needing these funds.
6. Initiate Rideshare Program – After hiring staff, the rideshare efforts should begin. This will also give planners an idea of the number of persons interested in using transit to commute.

Year 2

With the scheduled long distance routes in place, the county committees can then move onto identifying other areas of their operations that may benefit from coordination efforts. Continued communication between the workgroups and stakeholders is required in order to achieve these annual objectives. A mentoring program for small operators in the region would improve operations of the small operators and the overall coordination efforts for the region.

Some of the mentoring can include driver training and maintenance, for example. Immediate returns are made on safety and performance of the small operators.

Tasks

1. Fine tune scheduled coordinated long distance routes.
2. Plan additional services between operators that may be coordinated – driver training, and/or maintenance, for example.
3. Initiate service expansions to colonias (El Aguila, El Metro, CACST-Rainbow Lines).
4. Aggressively market ridesharing efforts.
5. Initiate mentoring program.

Year 3

As the workgroups continue to identify needs and coordination opportunities, then other services can be reviewed. New services will be initiated throughout the service area as local funds become available to support service.

Tasks

1. Workgroups continue service evaluation and coordination efforts.
2. Implement services in selected corridors of the region.
3. Initiate additional service expansions to colonias (El Aguila, El Metro, CACST-Rainbow Lines).

Year 4

In the 4th year as the workgroups have identified and implemented service improvements, the efforts will now focus on coordinating planning and administrative activities. A Regional

Mobility Manager will be responsible for coordinating a wide variety of public and private transportation service as well as acting as the Regional Rideshare Manager for the four counties.

Tasks

1. Implement all other services as local funding becomes available – this will be the final piece of the operational changes in the regional plan.
2. Evaluation of services to consolidate and fine-tune as necessary – Fine tuning will be necessary on a regular basis – at least semi-annually.
3. Evaluate and plan for service expansions to colonias (El Aguila, El Metro, CACST - Rainbow Lines).
4. Evaluate and implement shopper shuttles – throughout service area where local funding is available.

Year 5

In Year 5 all coordinated services should be in place and the Regional Mobility Manager should be operational. With all of the workgroup efforts, the Regional Mobility Manager should be in position to coordinate and manage services and begin to identify alternative funding sources. Most activities will be fine tuning and initiating a new five year planning process.

Tasks

1. Initiate new five-year plan of activities – as the Regional Mobility Manager, a new five-year planning process should be implemented.
2. Continue coordination efforts – complete the coordination of operators.
3. Evaluate and plan for service expansions to colonias (El Aguila, El Metro, CACST - Rainbow Lines).
4. Initiate Rideshare Program – once the Regional Mobility Manager is established, the rideshare efforts should begin. This will also give planners an idea of the number of persons interested in using transit to commute.
5. Evaluate Dial-A-Ride opportunities.
6. Discuss further coordination opportunities among the paratransit operators.

FUNDING PRIORITIES – JARC, NEW FREEDOM, AND SECTION 5310

The JARC funds are targeted for access to employment for low-income persons. The New Freedom funding is to be used to expand access beyond the Americans with Disabilities Act for persons with disabilities. The Section 5310 funds are available for elderly and disabled transportation. These programs all require a system plan to use these funds. As part of the plan, these funding sources are addressed throughout the document. They are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: SUMMARY OF FUNDING SOURCES

Activity	JARC	New Freedom	Section 5310	Section 5311	AAA
Mobility Manager	Yes	Yes			
Ridesharing	Yes				
Coordinate Paratransit Service		Yes	Yes		Yes
Implement Fixed-Route	Yes	Yes			
Implement Dial-a-Ride		Yes		Yes	
Implement Fixed Schedule		Yes		Yes	
Service to Colonias	Yes	Yes			
Shopper Shuttles					
Commuter Service	Yes			Yes	
Procure Vehicles		Yes	Yes	Yes	
Procure Technology		Yes	Yes	Yes	